

Review of *Tilting Cervantes: Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture*

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Abstract:

This article is a review of *Tilting Cervantes: Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture* by Bruce R. Burningham.

Keywords: Book Review | Literature | Don Quixote

Article:

Bruce R. Burningham. *Tilting Cervantes: Baroque Reflections on Postmodern Culture*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008. x + 228 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$69.95 (cl), \$29.95 (pbk). ISBN: 978-0-8265-1602-2 (cl), 978-0-8265-1603-9 (pbk).

Where do we (as scholars, as readers, as viewers, as cultural agents) draw the line? From the envelope-pushing initial image to the final playful consideration of the front and back covers of Patricia Heaton's autobiography, *Motherhood and Hollywood*, Bruce Burningham's second book invites us to engage in lively debates regarding accepted/contested boundaries. The provocative cover art - based on the winning entry for the 2004 Festival Cervantino poster competition - has generated a great deal of discussion regarding where the line should be drawn across the nude male model in order to test boundaries without crossing into blatantly objectionable regions. (Unanimously selected by a prestigious panel of judges, the original poster sparked tremendous controversy and was subsequently censored, as detailed in several articles: see "Braun Quixote": <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/oct/15/entertainment/et-cervantes15>, consulted 19 May 2009.) Though eye-catching, what most intrigues me about the visual employed here is an element not present in the original - a suggestive shadow-evocative of the reflections with a difference Burningham traces in postmodern works and their relations to Baroque texts.

In his prologue, Burningham underscores that he anticipates most of his readers will have expertise in one, but not both, of the periods he considers. In this sense, I am precisely one of the

readers he envisions, as I was unfamiliar with many of the contemporary works he analyzes (in fact, I did not know Marilyn Manson was a man until reading his second chapter). I therefore openly acknowledge that I lack the requisite background to evaluate these sections, as compelling as they seem to me. Yet I would venture to say that if they are as well-documented and solidly reasoned as his interpretations of the early modern works, they will most assuredly have much to offer experts in contemporary literatures and cultures. In fact, Burningham excels in providing original, nuanced readings, often self-reflective in their own right.

Chapter 1, "Lope de Vega, John Ford and the Beleaguered Hegemony of Empire" leads us to consider carefully the dynamics of "self/other." Chapter 2, "Johnny Rotten, Marilyn Manson, and the Limits of Picaresque Performance" challenges readers to confront the eschatological. Though I find Burningham's arguments convincing for the most part, I was struck by the marked contrast between my own intellectual appreciation for the mystery-meat empanadas of the Spanish classical text and my visceral rejection of the ersatz corned beef sandwich and seminal omelet. Whereas I can more easily appreciate the meaningful social critique of the earlier works, the contemporary ones considered here seem to privilege shock value. Chapter 3, "Chuck Palahniuk, Narrative Schizophrenia, and the Cervantine Picaresque" offers a brilliant analysis of *Fight Club* and Cervantes's ventures into the picaresque, enlightening both.

In his fourth chapter, "John Lasseter's *Toy Story* as Postmodern Don Quixote," Burningham displays intellectual courage. Many scholars would shy away from topics that might be disparaged by traditionally-oriented critics; his choice to work on this pair of Disney flicks (a far cry from the tough texts dealt with in previous chapters) might be dismissed as frivolous by some. Nonetheless, Burningham employs these examples of popular culture to tackle serious issues raised by postmodernism and fruitfully analyzes their relationship to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Ever since I first read this study, it has been required reading for every participant in my *Don Quixote* classes. It consistently provokes lively discussions while its carefully structured analysis allows students to grasp challenging concepts related to postmodernism. In chapter 5, "Salman Rushdie, Author of the *Captive's Tale*," Burningham further explores the relationships between contemporary literature and Cervantes. His comparative approach reveals his keen understanding of complex theoretical issues as he untangles the web of signification that unites texts and authors separated by geographical and temporal boundaries. Chapter 6, "Terry Gilliam's *Apocryphal Brazil*; or, *Blame It on Dulcinea*" proffers a suggestive reading of the ways in which the relationship between the film's Sam Lowry and Jill Layton mirrors, both reflecting and distorting, that between *Don Quixote* and *Dulcinea*. The final chapter, "*The Matrix: Reflected*," is a powerful exploration of how the trilogy furthers the questioning of human experience and human identity already begun in Cervantes's masterpiece.

The conclusion is a fitting one for this volume: not only does it provide closure by tying together the various lines of inquiry from previous chapters, it also opens new topics for consideration by providing an insightful reading of two well-known sonnets and their dialogic relationship with each other. He then relates the dynamic exchange between Go'ngora and Sor Juana on the nature

of beauty to the tensions created between the front and back covers of Patricia Heaton's autobiography.

One of the hallmarks of Burningham's scholarship, and one that he amply demonstrates in *Tilting Cervantes*, is that he does not limit himself to safe or established approaches. Indeed, he is willing to take intellectual risks, a key characteristic that epitomizes all innovative research. That this volume has already become required reading in a seminar on architectural theory attests to the breadth of its interdisciplinary appeal. Yet, this interdisciplinarity itself presents several difficulties that Burningham tackles courageously. As the texts challenge him, he challenges us as readers to move beyond our comfortable critical niches and invites us to explore the richness of all facets of the literary looking glass, fashioned through centuries of cultural exchange, that simultaneously reflects and refracts the breadth of human experience, both lived and imagined. This must-read book will doubtless engender lively debates that will enrich multiple disciplines for years to come.

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